

youth-adult partnerships

Studio in a School



A Powerful Force for Community Change

by Shuan Butcher

In the summer of 2001, a \$1,500 grant from Youth as Resources (YAR) in Pine River-Backus, Minnesota, enabled two teens and one adult to camp their way to Colorado, where they learned how to build and install solar water heaters. “Both youth were facing court-ordered community service, but they wanted to do something other than cleaning toilets in a nursing home,” said Jason Edens, then the boys’ ninth grade English teacher and founding director of the Rural Renewable Energy Alliance (RREAL), an organization that installs solar heating systems in low-income houses. “They asked me if they could somehow complete their community service through RREAL” (Center for Youth as Resources [CYAR], in press). Serving as the project’s adult advisor, Edens contacted the county juvenile corrections office to

establish RREAL as an approved community service venue. The youth wrote and presented the grant proposal, secured YAR funding, and mapped out a camping itinerary. On their return home, the young men used their newly acquired skills to install solar heating systems in four low-income households. “Through this project, the participants gained valuable, real-world skills, saw a good chunk of their country in a fiscally frugal way, and then gave back to their

community,” observed Nolita Christensen, YAR co-coordinator in Pine River-Backus (CYAR, in press).

That same year, youth members of the Haydenville Preservation Committee in Haydenville, Ohio, applied for and received a YAR grant to beautify the landscape adjacent to a historic museum and community center. “We were the last company town in Ohio,” explained Nyla Vollmer, a preservation committee activist who served as adult coordinator on the project. “When the company sold the town in the 1960s, people were able to buy their homes, but many 19th-century buildings became dilapidated. The kids wanted to have a reason to take pride in where they were from. We met to brainstorm ideas for community improvements. Since the preservation committee has its meetings at the museum, that site was identified as a priority” (CYAR, in press). After the youth were awarded the \$600 grant, Vollmer recruited a local landscape architect to assess the site *pro bono* and

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recommended flowers and shrubs reminiscent of turn-of-the-century gardens. She then worked with the youth to install plants purchased with grant funds, enhancing the aesthetic authenticity of the preservation site. “A lot of our kids come from homes where

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their parents don’t care where they are,” Vollmer said. “We’ve found that by empowering kids to design and implement their own clean-up projects, they are less apt to go around and mess up” (CYAR, in press).

These vignettes are just two examples of successful youth-adult partnerships gleaned from a recent audit of Youth as Resources programs nationwide. Audit findings were compiled using a number of research tools—including written questionnaires, an online survey, and phone interviews with both youth and adult activists—and reported in the publication *Optimizing Youth as Resources: Ideas for Successful Programming* (CYAR, in press). The young people who spearheaded each project were remarkably motivated and innovative, and they had the advantage of practicing good citizenship in real-world contexts. With the guidance, enthusiasm, and complementary support of adult mentors, they were able to exert a real and tangible impact on their communities.

Assets in Action

Whereas previous youth service models have viewed developmental assets as an *end*, Youth as Resources leverages positive youth assets such as creativity, leadership, and teamwork as a *means*. In YAR, young people and adults work together as equal partners to identify and address real community needs, thus ensuring fresh approaches to chronic problems and a continuum of civic stewardship. The model embraces a paradigm shift that Karen Pittman of the International Youth Foundation and the Forum for Youth Investment has described as moving from “youth participation for youth development to youth and adult partnerships for community change” (Pittman, 2000). Furthermore, while youth-led service

is often spontaneous and episodic, youth-adult partnerships, particularly in the YAR framework, are more formalized. As a result, outcomes often are more intentional and permanent, resulting in real community change and community building.

Both an organizational network and philosophy, Youth as Resources was first conceived in 1986 by the National Crime Prevention Council and implemented by three Indiana pilot communities in 1987, with funding from the Lilly Endowment. YAR encourages young people in a variety of settings—such as faith-based institutions, community organizations, public housing, schools, and correctional facilities—to team up with adults, conduct community assessments, apply for and receive grants, and carry out community service projects. Grant dollars have been used to fuel literacy programs, drug and violence prevention, youth advocacy, hunger relief, voting and citizenship initiatives, building renovations, and much more. Each project is shepherded by an adult advisor, but youth generate the ideas, formulate the budget, and design and implement the plan.

The YAR model hinges on three core principles:

- Youth-adult partnerships
- Youth-led service
- Youth in governance through grant making

Youth are not limited to the role of grant *recipients* in the Youth as Resources equation; they also work in partnership with adults as grant *makers*. Local YAR boards composed of both youth and adults screen proposals, interview potential grantees, select grant recipients, and award grants from a pool of funds provided by local program sponsors. Board members of all ages monitor and evaluate YAR-funded projects to make sure goals are met and to troubleshoot problems.

Since the inception of Youth as Resources, more than 350,000 youth from across the United States and beyond have joined forces with adults in their communities as service providers, board members, and philanthropists. Today there are 75 YAR programs in 22 states, funding service projects in rural, suburban, and urban settings.

Generation Gaps

The concept of youth-adult partnerships is not new. In 1974, the National Commission on Resources for Youth asserted that, “Youth participation can . . .

be defined as involving youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs, with the opportunity for planning and/or decision-making affecting others. . . . There is mutuality in teaching and learning. . . . [E]ach age group sees itself as a resource for the other and offers what it uniquely can provide” (cited in Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2003, p. 25). Young people’s energy, enthusiasm, and optimism can be major catalysts for social change. Adults’ commitment, drive, and institutional knowledge can help transform raw ideas into action.

This transaction, which can be referred to as *reciprocal mentoring*, constitutes a departure from traditional roles. Most young people do not have the opportunity to form relationships with adults in which power is absent from the equation. There is a top-down dynamic inherent in their interactions with parents, teachers, ministers, and guidance counselors. Youth-adult partnerships, on the other hand, create opportunities for shared learning.

Unfortunately, opportunities for reciprocal mentoring are sparse. Evidence suggests that youth have yet to be fully recognized by our society as worthy partners (and mentors) in the social contract. While Independent Sector (1996) reports that 59 percent of youth volunteer an average of 3.5 hours per week, stereotypes continue to characterize young people as incapable of enacting meaningful social and community change. According to a Public Agenda survey, only 37 percent of American adults believe today’s children, once grown, will make the world a better place. The same study found that 61 percent of American adults are convinced that today’s youth “face a crisis in their values and morals.” These adults “look at teenagers with misgiving, and view them as undisciplined, disrespectful and unfriendly” (Farkas & Johnson, 1997).

Perhaps the real crisis is not an epidemic of youth apathy or moral ineptitude, but rather our society’s hesitation to entrust young people with real—not hypothetical—social responsibility. That latter tendency leads youth to feel isolated, marginalized, and discounted. Lisa Hira (2001), a YAR youth board member in Stamford, Connecticut, wrote:

What makes or breaks young people is the community’s attitude toward us, the examples set in our environment, and a consistently condescending—or positive and encouraging—reception of our community input. There’s a real temptation to only produce as much as is expected of us. Involving youth in any

way, shape, or form in the issues that affect us immediately shows our power as agents of social change. . . . It is of utmost importance that young people feel their voice matters, but it is of even greater importance that their voice *does* matter! It’s time adults moved from patting young people on the head for having “cute little ideas” and actually began listening to them. My generation will be in control mere decades from now and voting even sooner than that. (Hira, 2001, p. 3)

Empirical data suggest that there is no lack of passion among our youth. A survey by Princeton Survey Research (1998) reveals that 73 percent of America’s 60 million young people believe they can make a difference in their communities. And, when given a seat at the table, they do. In spring 2003, a 4-H club in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, used a \$500 grant from Door County YAR to team up with a professional horse trainer to learn how to break a colt. The group then leveraged a second YAR mini-grant to organize a fundraiser to raffle off its newly trained colt. Some \$30,000 in proceeds from the raffle were used to provide accessibility accommodations for the home of a 4-H member with muscular dystrophy (CYAR, in press). Youth ingenuity was the key catalyst for this multi-faceted project; adult expertise helped increase its impact exponentially.

A Framework for Dialogue

Few dispute the value of youth-adult collaboration in theory. However, putting the concept into practice proves more difficult because meaningful communication between youth and adults is uncommon beyond the confines of school and family. Search Institute data confirms the persistence of a social disconnect between today’s youth and adults. The latest iteration of the study *Grading Grown-Ups* (Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2002) asked both youth and adults to evaluate their intergenerational interactions outside their own families, focusing on 18 specific actions that adults can take to help build developmental assets among young people. The study concluded, “Although youth and adults share ideas about what’s important, there was general agreement among study participants that these relationship-building actions just aren’t happening very often” (Scales et al., 2002, p. 3). Only 46 percent of youth surveyed said that adults who were not teachers or family members

provided guidance in decision making; even fewer—38 percent—said adults in the community were likely to seek young people's opinions when making decisions that affect youth.

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The reality is that youth-adult partnerships do not occur naturally. Put an even mix of young people and adults in a room, and the youth will inevitably sit on one side and the adults on the other. Yet experience has shown that engaging multiple generations as cohorts for community change can have a tremendous impact when shared decision-making is made a priority.

Youth instigators need not be limited to honor-roll students. At The Guidance Center, an aftercare program for juvenile offenders in Wayne County, Michigan, young people empowered with YAR funding worked with adult mentors to paint colorful murals and positive messages on a graffiti-riddled wall adjacent to a middle school. The same group advocated for the creation of a local teen center, creating a formal presentation and lobbying its city council twice (CYAR, in press). "YAR is ideal for the juvenile justice system. I wish we'd had something like it when my son was fourteen years old," said Carrie, an adult advisor and YAR board member whose son, now 20, spent many of his teen years in Michigan detention facilities. "Back then, it was my responsibility as a parent to find community service projects for him to do [to fulfill the restorative justice requirement of the court], and I had to make sure he went, which made it more like punishment" (CYAR, in press). YAR grants, in contrast, empower at-risk youth to design and implement their own service ideas. Like Carrie, some adult mentors are drawn from the ranks of concerned parents and community volunteers, while others are correctional officers, clinicians, caseworkers, educators, or business leaders.

Extending the concept of youth-adult partnership to grant making and policy decisions is equally important. According to Morgan Smith, a ninth-grade board member for Youth as Resources of Central Indiana (YARCI), "Youth-adult partnerships are beneficial because we don't know some of the things that adults

know and vice versa. Adults don't usually understand how kids think and communicate, so, for instance, they don't know how to reach out to kids to let them know grant funding is available. We help them get inside kids' brains." (CYAR, in press). Hosted by United Way of Central Indiana, YARCI has, since its inception in 1987, awarded more than \$1.6 million in grants for 1,340 community service projects involving more than 35,000 youth volunteers.

The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development has played a leading role in assessing the benefits of service collaborations between youth and adults. YAR was one of several models explored in the center's study on youth in decision making, which stated:

The current emphasis is on infusing young people into all levels of organizational decision-making. Young people . . . need to be involved not only in day-to-day programming decisions, but they should also be involved in organizational governance. . . . The mutual contributions of youth and adults can result in a synergy, a new power and energy that propels decision-making groups to greater innovation and productivity. . . . We discovered that in this atmosphere youth and adults become more committed to attending meetings and create a climate that is grounded in honest appraisal, reflection and ongoing learning. (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000, p. 7)

The Innovation Center study concluded that adults benefit from collaborating with young people in four primary ways:

- Having experienced the competence of youth firsthand, adults began to perceive young people as legitimate, crucial contributors to organizational decision-making processes.
- Working with youth enhanced the commitment and energy of adults to the organization.
- Adults felt more effective and more confident in working with and relating to youth.
- Adults came to understand the needs and concerns of youth. They became more attuned to programming issues, making them more likely to reach outside the organization and share their

new knowledge and insights. They gained a stronger sense of community connectedness. (Zeldin, et al., 2000, p. 8)

Achieving Balance of Power

Leon, 67, is a retired African-American who previously worked in a factory. Betsy, 17, is a white high school student. Under normal circumstances, it's unlikely the two would ever meet, much less interact and become friends—but both serve on the YAR board in Wood County, West Virginia. Their rapport is magical. This YAR site, like many across the country, shares power among the youth and adult board members. For example, two chairpersons, one youth and one adult, are selected, and two board secretaries are elected. The youth leaders are given the opportunity to assume responsibility, so that the adults perform their official roles only in the absence of the youth officer (CYAR, in press).

Naturally, there are challenges on the road to successful youth-adult partnerships. Like most long-lasting relationships, these partnerships don't happen overnight. Scheduling and logistics can be complicated for multigenerational grant-making boards and for grantee groups who design and implement service projects. Youth sometimes need training in how to participate equally and effectively in meetings, administrative duties, research, and other activities. Adults often need to learn how to speak less, create space, and share their knowledge and experience without overpowering the dialogue.

To make reciprocal mentoring work, training must be continuous and constant. Building a culture of trust and respect—often through group-building activities—is critical. Equally important is identifying clear expectations and discussing perceptions or stereotypes that each group has of the other. These challenges can and should be addressed at the onset, when partnerships are formed. At YARCI, for example, all board members undergo the same orientation, with tenured board members serving as one-on-one mentors for incoming board members. Age is not a factor; in many cases, the trainees are adults and the mentors are teenagers. Similarly, the YAR program in Pine River–Backus, Minnesota, is managed by adult co-coordinator Nolita Christensen and youth co-coordinator Andy Twiton, 15, who work equal hours for equal wages. Throughout the YAR network, meetings and committees are chaired just as often by youth

Finding Adults to Partner with Youth

YAR empowers young people in a variety of settings to enact powerful changes in their communities while gaining leadership skills, self-confidence, and a sense of connectedness. Recruiting dedicated adults to complete the partnership equation is often the biggest challenge. *Developing Communities in Partnership with Youth: A Manual for Starting and Maintaining Youth as Resources Programs* (2001) lists groups from which adult board members and advisors might be drawn:

- School officials—such as teachers, administrators, or counselors—who have immediate access to young people
- Correctional officers, teachers, and counselors who work with young people in juvenile justice settings and understand how to procure financial resources within the correctional framework
- Decision makers who influence local youth-related policies
- Public servants who can foster community-wide program support and assist in identifying sources of public funding
- Marketing professionals who can help market YAR programs to various parts of the community
- Businesspeople who have access to financial and donated resources, including professional services, materials, and equipment
- Funders and fundraisers who can help tap into available resources and provide guidance with proposal writing
- Trainers who can help facilitate meetings, build team spirit, plan and facilitate grant-writing workshops, and provide organizational management expertise
- Reporters, editors, and other media professionals who can provide assistance with media relations strategies
- Philanthropists who can lend expertise to YAR governance and incorporate the YAR message into their own work
- Parents who understand family dynamics and have vital access to young people
- Social service agency staff who can provide access to youth and adult volunteers and are often experienced proposal writers

as by adults. Training workshops for prospective grant applicants are often led concurrently by youth and adult mentors who not only profess the merits of youth-adult partnerships but also model the concept (CYAR, in press).

Pam Garza and Pam Stevens (2002) studied and cited the YAR model extensively in *Best Practices in Youth Philanthropy*:

Youth philanthropy aims to engage young people in the “real” action of community building with adults. This dynamic process fosters healthy relationships across generations with reciprocal commitments to share information, experience and resources. The resulting networks establish a pervasive sense of community membership, community pride and trust between youth and adults. (Garza & Stevens, 2002, p. 14)

Garza and Stevens suggest the following tips for successful youth-adult partnerships:

- In the initial orientation, include training on how partnerships work; continue to address this issue throughout the relationship. Both youth and adult members should regularly reflect on how their partnership is functioning and be ready to make changes.
- Create an atmosphere in which both youth and adults can discuss their real concerns or problems. Train boards to use parliamentary procedure so that all members can have their say.
- Give youth members the opportunity to provide leadership by, for instance, running meetings, reviewing proposals and visiting potential grantees, training new members, and making presentations.
- Give youth and adult partners the chance to reflect on the roles they have assumed in the group, changing their responsibilities as needed so that each individual’s strengths contribute as fully as possible to the group’s needs.
- Make important decisions by consensus of the group.

Diversity and Democracy

During the 2000 presidential elections, 22 million adult voters failed to show up at the polls. That same year, in St. Cloud, Minnesota, 3,600 students of

non-voting age turned out to cast their ballots as part of the Kids Vote Project, a national initiative designed to educate students in grades K–6 on the fundamentals of democracy. With a grant from the local YAR program at United Way, along with funding from local civic groups and the City of St. Cloud, roughly 200 youth activists partnered with an equal number of adult volunteers in the community to run kids’ polls concurrently with live elections in local precincts. Although kids’ votes didn’t officially count, their ballots were tallied and the results were broadcast live on a local radio station (CYAR, in press). Kids got a taste of what it means to be an American citizen, so that they are more likely to vote for real when the time comes.

“It was a very successful event, and the kids showed a great deal of insight,” said Eli Dean, a high school junior and member of the St. Cloud YAR board that approved funding for the project.

This board has shown me many things about life and myself. I have learned, first and foremost, that nearly anyone can be a leader if the dedication is there. I have also made a stronger connection with my community and have grown to have more concern for the community-wide picture than just the school I go to or the sports or activities I participate in. I recognize now that many stereotypes about teenagers and adults in the community are far from the truth. I have learned that adults and young people can work together constructively and with a very strong mutual respect for each other. (CYAR, in press)

Youth on Board (2001) observes that age diversity is an important consideration for boards that want to embrace multiple voices and perspectives. Age diversity, like cultural and ethnic diversity, fosters a rich, collaborative environment of mutual respect, open-mindedness, and empowerment. Multigenerational partnerships can lead to healthier, stronger communities by nurturing better leaders, collaborators, and thinkers. The process starts with engaging youth and adults together in joint problem solving in the context of real communities. For the success of our communities and of our democratic society, we must bring all members of society to the table if we are going to effect community change.

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